

*The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself.*

Andrew Pettegree.

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In this elegant survey, Andrew Pettegree sets out to explain how, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, news became not only a major curiosity for early modern Europeans, but an essential instrument for motivating political and social action. The book is articulated in three parts covering the roughly sequential appearance of manuscript newsletters, printed newspapers, and variety magazines in the core European areas. Preconditions for timely delivery included a relatively regular postal system; this was built by the Habsburg emperors, at first to keep control over a sprawling collection of states. Already by the time Martin Luther created the first “publishing sensation” (68), Europe possessed what could be described as a multichanneled, multimedia news-distribution system, including orality, script, and print, and involving several genres ranging from poetry, to prose newsletters, to political pamphlets.

The complexities of distribution and the difficulties of transportation emerged spectacularly in the debacle of the Spanish Armada, when crisscrossing orders and updates added further confusion to an already hopeless endeavor. Other events where news played a role are analyzed in suitable detail, from the Thirty Years’ War to the English Civil War, from the Spanish Succession War to the French Revolution, with sidelights on the Spanish explorations and the British colonies. In every major capital, news pioneers digested rumor, hearsay, and a certain amount of fact into whatever form the genre, the time constraints, and the ever-present censors allowed, and vendors sold the news publications to a varied and increasingly broadly based public. Significant differences occurred, of course, between the various countries, with Germany leading the

way to serial printing, Holland to multiple advertisements, France to state journalism, and England to an openly biased opinion press.

In telling this story, the author draws upon his experience at the helm of the Universal Short Title Catalogue project, which has saved myriads of previously unknown news publications of the period from bibliographical oblivion. Here, as in *The Book in the Renaissance* (2010), he gives the general reader the benefit of the latest research while offering an interpretation that challenges some standard views, once again emphasizing the elements of continuity between preprinting and the age of print against the prevalent technophile orthodoxy. If the Venice handwritten newsletters were still going strong in the time of Giacomo Casanova, this could only have been because printed newspapers were long regarded as intolerably vulgar. Considering the book's ambitious breath of coverage and the space limitations, it is no wonder that far more attention should be devoted to the lively and often-entertaining histories of the individual publications than to actual contents, or that there should be a far greater emphasis on the general narrative than on the sometimes scrappy theoretical and historiographical literature, except for the obligatory snipe at Habermas, despite substantial agreement here with the public-sphere thesis.

Some questions remain tantalizingly open. How did individual readers engage with the news they read, and how did this reading affect their actions? Over the long run, what was the collective impact of numerous news readers on the societies and states of the time? There are no easy answers, also because the contents are often so "dry and routine" (207), indeed, so "esoteric" (360) that modern scholars can scarcely bring themselves to deal with them, much less muddle through them looking for clues to events and pseudoevents that might or might not have occurred, while gathering assorted amusing sidelights on events already enshrined in the modern textbook version of European history. We are given the occasional reaction recorded all too parsimoniously by the hurried notetaker — for instance, Jan de Boer complaining about the contrasting accounts of major actions in the Seven Years' War. Perhaps when more such sources come to light, we may expect to be informed in equally copious detail regarding the history of news reading. And once there is a sufficient corpus of machine-readable news content, we may also have a better idea of what the news was. At least now there is a deftly written and sensibly organized history of who made it, and how.

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